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ABSTRACT

A secondary analysis of survey data obtained from 331 Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota, residents shortly after the 1980 presidential election showed that self-interest exerts a strong influence on voting behavior. Self-interest is the degree to which an issue impinges immediately and tangibly upon an individual's private life. Respondents were asked to list the top two political issues of most importance to them. The survey also included 10 items which objectively assessed the respondents' self-interest on economic matters, making it possible to determine the respondents personal agendas, i.e., how they ranked the issues in terms of importance for practical purposes. For example, respondents were asked about the frequency with which they compared prices for groceries, their satisfaction with their take-home pay, and similar types of questions. Using these items to form an index of self-interest, it was hypothesized that for those respondents who indicated a primary concern with economic issues and who were personally involved with these issues, a stronger relationship would be found between their self-interest index and their vote choice. The hypothesis was supported. (RM)

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Personal Agendas and the Influence of Self Interest on Voting Behavior

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By

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Paper presented at the

Midwestern Psychological Association Meeting

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Running head: PERSONAL AGENDAS

Personal Agendas and the Influence of Self Interest on Voting Behavior

One of the continuing concerns in social psychology has been the relationship between attitudes and behavior. In political science, there has also been a longstanding interest in the extent to which political attitudes and beliefs may be useful in predicting voting behavior. Two of the more interesting political attitudes have been what are termed self interests and symbolic beliefs. As traditionally defined by political researchers who have used these terms, "self interest" refers to the degree to which some issue "impinges immediately and tangibly upon an individual's private life" (Kinder & Kiewiet, 1979), while self interest attitudes are presumed to reflect this perceived impingement.

"Symbolic beliefs", on the other hand, are acquired through socialization influences experienced early in life. According to this view, this early socialization involves conditioning of specific emotional responses toward specific global issues; for example, of strong negative affective responses toward "busing" or "taxes". In adulthood, related issues in the form of political symbols may trigger the earlier-socialized response, usually with little necessary calculation of the future costs and benefits of such responses to one's current private needs (Sears, Lau, Tyler & Allen, 1980).

The conventional finding in past research looking at the relative influence of self interests and symbolic beliefs upon voting

behavior has been that symbolic beliefs have the predominant influence on voting, while self interests have a negligible influence on the voters' decision. The research which will be addressed here raises the question, "Under what conditions do self interests more strongly influence voting behavior?"

There are, in fact, certain reasons which might lead one to suspect that the influence of symbolic beliefs is not as widespread as it at first appears. In particular, past approaches to the study of self interests and symbolic beliefs have a priori specified the particular issue of interest, for example, busing--an issue which may certainly be of interest to the researcher, but which is not necessarily of interest to the voter. That is, given an issue, it has generally been assumed that all persons will consider that issue equally. It seems reasonable to believe, however, that in an election, particularly a presidential election, in which many different issues are involved, that there will be great variability in terms of the degree of importance or priority which any given individual affixes to any given issue. In other words, people likely differ in terms of what we call "personal agendas".

A "personal agenda" is a ranking of issues in terms of their importance or priority to the individual who uses them for a particular purpose. In the realm of politics, such personal agendas may be formed so as to enable the voter to distill the large amount of political information available for consideration in

deciding a political preference. Presumably, those issues which are at the top of one's agenda should represent more salient issues to the individual, issues for which relevant personal information should more likely be considered.

In order for personal information regarding one's self interest with respect to a particular issue to have a relatively large impact upon one's voting choice, that issue would have to be towards the top of that individual's personal agenda. Note that we are making a distinction here between an issue's being high on one's personal agenda and that issue's involving some degree of self interest for the individual. The two may go hand-in-hand, but this is not a necessary condition. In addition, having a self interest with respect to a given issue does not in and of itself make that issue appear at the top of one's personal agenda. That is, on any given day, one is likely to encounter many different types of direct experiences, all of which may impinge upon one's welfare in some way or another. Which of these experiences, however, is taken to have implications for one's more long-term goals and plans is an entirely different matter. Only certain experiences are likely to be remembered and viewed as useful to making future decisions. Therefore, in our view, only those experiences which pertain to one's most important goals, plans, or in our particular case, political issues with respect to a given election are likely to be considered as germain to one's political choice.

It makes little sense, then, to believe that objective measures can reliably identify such a subjective entity as self interest. Yet, in most past studies such objective measures have been utilized, and examples of these may be seen in Table 1.
Self interest was taken by these researchers to be a composite of the responses to these three items. Yet no attempt was made to assess how, or even if, for example, the respondents felt threatened by the imminent busing of their children. Indeed, no attempt was made to find out just how important the busing issue was to the respondents at all. It is perhaps less surprising, then, that they found little relation between the respondents' "objective" self interests and their feelings about public policy involving the busing issue.

There is a way, however, of placing those objective assessments of self interest into context. That is, by assessing which issues are deemed by the respondent to be most important, one can adopt a more idiographic approach and test whether the self interests of <u>those</u> important issues exert a stronger influence upon voting behavior than do the self interests for those persons for whom those <u>same</u> issues are not as important. Such an idiographic approach, as originally proposed by Allport in the personality domain, examines the configuration of attitudes or beliefs <u>within</u> an individual, rather than the traditional nomothetic approach of examing a single attitude across individuals. In this manner, we can address the question raised at the outset: Under what conditions do self

interests exert a stronger influence on voting behavior?

To answer this question, we performed a secondary analysis of survey data obtained from 331 Minneapolis-St. Paul residents shortly after the 1980 presidential election. These data were collected in a Twin Cities Public Opinion poll conducted by John Sullivan and his colleagues from the Minnesota Political Science department. Within this Twin Cities survey, there were 10 items which objectively assessed the respondents' "self interest" on economic matters. For example, respondents were asked about the frequency with which they compared prices for groceries while shopping, their satisfaction with their present level of take-home pay, and similar types of questions. Using these items to form an index of self interest, we hypothesized that for those respondents indicating a primary concern with economic issues on an open ended personal agenda measure, a stronger relationship should have been found between their self interest index and their vote choice. This would indicate that economic issues were high enough on their personal agendas that their direct experiences with finance-related activities would have been reflected in how they voted.

For example, if some respondents indicated that inflation was one of the most important issues to them, and they had also engaged in a number of money-saving activities, then their direct experiences were likely to enhance their consideration of the presidential candidates in terms of who they felt would do a

better job of fighting off inflation. To the extent, for example, that they felt that Reagan would do a better job, then they were more likely to vote for Reagan. Other respondents, by contrast, may also have felt that economic issues were highly important to them, yet they may not have engaged in the sort of direct experience activities which were used to assess self interest objectively. In their case, for example, to the extent that they felt that Carter was doing a fine job at handling the economy, especially as far as their own finances were concerned, then they were more likely to vote for Carter. Hence, even though these two types of respondents did not have the same level of self interest, because they both felt that economic issues were important, their levels of self interest could be seen to relate to their vote choice. On the other hand, supposing they had all ranked "pollution" much lower down on their personal agenda of important political issues. Then regardless of their self interests involving pollution, one would not expect as strong a relation between their pollution self interest and their vote choice--particularly relative to the relation between their economic self interest and their vote choice.

Results of our secondary analysis support this example. Respondents had an opportunity to list their first and second most important issues. As the data presented in the handout indicate, for those who listed economic-related issues (which could have been government spending, inflation or unemployment) as <u>both</u> their first

and second choices, the correlation between their self interest index and their voting choice was .39. In contrast, for those respondents indicating no economic issue as either their first or second choice, the correlation between their self interest index and their voting choice was an insignificant -.07. A comparison between these two groups showed that they did not differ significantly in their average level of self interest. Thus, by taking into consideration the degree of personal involvement held by the individuals for the issue associated with the self interest index, in this case, with economic issues, it was indeed possible to find results suggestive of an effect of self interest on behavior.

Such results reflect a more general approach to the study of political reasoning about political issues. Our results emphasize the importance of considering personal involvement in analyzing how people perceive and think about those political issues. In addition, they raise the question of the degree to which people adopt a more experiential or inductive approach to political reasoning, as opposed to a reliance upon the traditional deductive approach which more heavily emphasizes the directive role of symbolic beliefs. Before one can implant our findings into this context, however, the nature of inductive versus deductive approaches to political reasoning should be more intensely examined, preferably by using a national probability sample.

HAND OUT

Table 1

Personal Agendas and the Influence of Self Interest on Voting Behavior

"Self interest":	refers to the degree to which some issue "impinges immediately and tangibly upon an individual's private life" (Kinder & Kiewiet, 1979).
"Symbolic beliefs":	socialized emotional responses to global issues (e.g., taxes) which are triggered by political symbols; involve little or no calculation of costs and benefits to one's current private needs (Sears, Lau, Tyler & Allen, 1980).
"Personal agenda":	a ranking of issues in terms of their importance/ priority in relation to one's long-term goals and plans; those issues at the top of one's agenda represent more salient issues and self interests associated with those issues are considered to exert a stronger influence on behavior.

Example of past-used "objective" self interest measure (from Sears, Hensler & Speer)

For the busing issue:

1) In some places, school boards are taking some children out of their closest neighborhood schools and sending them by bus to other schools farther away. Has anything like this happened around here?

2) Do you have any children aged 5 to 18 who go to public school here?

3) Is the grade school nearest you all white, mostly white, about half-and-half, mostly black, or all black?

Table 1 (Continued)

Example of "objective" self interest items used in current study:

1) When shopping for groceries, I compare prices carefully and more often buy the cheaper brand (Frequently/Occasionally/Never)

2) I avoid going out to eat at nicer restaurants as much as I used to (Frequently/Occasionally/Never)

3) Would you say that you are better off or worse off financially than you were a year ago?

4) Would you say that you have been badly hurt by inflation, hurt somewhat, not affected very much, or helped financially by inflation?

Correlations of self interest index with vote choice:

For persons for whom economic issues important, $r = .39$, $p < .001$, $N = 64$.

For persons for whom economic issues not important, $r = -.07$, p = ns, $N = 45$. Fisher $Z = 2.45$, $p < .015$.

Standardized regression coefficients for self interest and symbolic belief indices:

For "economic issues important" group: self interest = .348, symbolic belief = .318.

For "economic issues less important" group: self interest = .023, symbolic belief = .399.

(All coefficients significant at .01 level or above except for self interest weight for second group, which is not significant.)